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ABSTRACT

Businesses, community agencies, career educators and counselors, churches, parents, and other community members are increasingly being approached to become actively involved in K-12 career education through school-to-work, tech prep, or other related programs. Community involvement in career education can assume many forms. Businesses can collaborate with schools through tech prep programs or youth apprenticeships. Community agencies such as the Chamber of Commerce can provide students with links to community leaders and community-based experiences through adopt-a-school programs and service learning projects. School counselors, parents, and other community members can help elementary school-aged children gain career awareness, clarify their values, and adopt positive work habits and behaviors. Parents can also become involved in their children's career choice process through mentoring, work shadowing, career planning activities, and documentation of experiences in career passports. The following suggestions have been offered for involving the community in K-12 career education: involve the right players; ensure commitment; develop a shared vision; produce a formal plan; emphasize performance; focus on common ground; and maintain the partnership. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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by Bettina Lankard Brown

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Community Involvement in K-12 Career Education

Just as "it takes a village to raise a child," the support of the whole community helps prepare children for the complex choices they must make in a changing world. This Digest looks at how career educators and counselors involve business, community agencies, churches, and others in assisting students with the process of shaping their life careers.

Career Education in Many Forms

Official federal support for career education began in 1974; although funding intensity has varied over the subsequent 20 plus years, career education continues to receive emphasis in the nation's schools. The most recent programs included under the umbrella of "career education" are titled "school-to-work" and "tech prep," programs that are receiving generous federal appropriations for 1996-97 (Hoyt 1996).

School-to-work programs, which include tech prep programs, are characterized by their focus on bridging the gap between school and work. They draw upon education and business collaboration, and partnerships between education and other parts of society. They are designed to provide "school-based learning, work-based learning, and activities to connect the two" (Wickwire 1995, p. 7); in this way, they engage the community in the career education and development of youth. The coordinated support network promoted in school-to-work programs is "linked to school and relies on parents, mentors, employers, youth advocates, and social service agencies to assist youth" (Rochester City School District 1994, p. 1).

Involvement of Community Businesses

Whether through school-to-work or tech prep programs, businesses are increasingly approached for active involvement in the educational community. As they recognize the growing need for technically, academically, and socially prepared workers, businesses are becoming more and more enthusiastic in their desire to collaborate with schools to provide up-to-date education and training for the students who will be their future workers. Tech prep programs capitalize on the employers' need for qualified workers by drawing employers into the identification of skills necessary for employment in their industries—thus establishing benchmarks for education and skill achievement. Most partnerships between schools and businesses focus on the delivery and development of academic and vocational skills (which include skills for employability). Such collaborative efforts can help students develop relevant skills for the workplace through revised up-to-date curriculum, youth apprenticeships, and mentoring experiences.

Youth apprenticeships afford another avenue by which community businesses become involved in the career education and development of youth. Apprenticeships require a partnership between "educators—secondary and postsecondary—and business people who are willing to provide jobs and worksite learning experiences for young people" (Joyce and Byrne 1995, p. 44). They have the advantage of taking students out of the classroom and exposing them to the rapidly changing work environment, complete with new technologies and new management processes.

Involvement of Community Agencies

Community agencies, such as the Chamber of Commerce, are also valuable resources for student career development as they afford linkage to community leaders and community-based experiences. In Austin, Texas, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce and the Austin Independent School District jointly administer the Austin Adopt-A-School program. The program, which began in 1983, includes every elementary, middle/junior high, and high school in Austin and over 1,500 adopters. The employer volunteers provide attendance incentives, dropout prevention, mentoring, periodic classroom instruction, parent training sessions, and teacher assistance in the form of professional development. The Motorola Teachers in Industry program, for example, offers teachers who are selected through a competitive application process 2-month summer internships with the company (University of Texas 1993).

Service learning projects that link students and community organizations afford another type of exposure to career development. Such projects offer students opportunities to learn the habits and conditions of the workplace as well as the personal benefit of doing service work. "By combining community service with learning activities and reflecting on their experiences, students realize increased personal, social, and intellectual growth and preparation for work" (Lankard 1995, p. 1). Through a Learn and Serve America grant administered by the Corporation for National Service, inner-city parents (trained in Harcum College's Early Childhood Education Program to be volunteer tutors in their children's classrooms) receive 12 college credits in exchange for their volunteering. These nontraditional student tutors have provided more than 6,000 hours of individual tutoring to over 480 at-risk children (Family Involvement Partnership for Learning 1996).

Involvement of School Counselors, Parents, and Other Community Members

Ken Hoyt's definition of career education, written in 1971, reflects the broad scope of career education: "Career Education is the total effort of the education system and the broader community to help all individuals become familiar with the values of a work-oriented society, to integrate those values into their personal value systems, and to implement them in their lives in such a way that work becomes possible, meaningful, and satisfying for each individual" (Hoyt 1996, p. 1). Bedrock components of true career education programs growing out of this definition include helping pupils acquire both positive work values and productive work habits—the basic goals of career education (ibid.).

Frequently, the career awareness focus of elementary school programs is on values clarification and the adoption of positive work habits and behaviors. One of the most recent programs

designed to develop student values, behaviors, and self-concept while exposing them to community is the Feinstein Foundation's *"I Can Make a Difference" Good Deeds Program.* In this program, students are asked to make a commitment to accomplish at least 33 good deeds, which they must record, discuss with others, and attempt to incorporate into their everyday behavior. This program is heralded by educators as one that has "made a positive contribution to the guidance, community-service, school-to-work, and other objectives for schools" (Alan Shawn Feinstein Associates 1996, p. 1). The program materials, developed for elementary school children, are designed to foster community service, character development, citizenship education, and communication skills. The program is action oriented and involves home, school, and community.

Parental involvement in the career choice process of youth has traditionally focused on mentoring and work shadowing. Recent career guidance efforts have attempted to involve parents in students' career planning activities and in the documentation of experiences in the career passport. The ***Career Orientation and Planning Profile*** (1995) provides a folder for parents, as well as students, in which parents are instructed to keep such information as lists of teachers, school activities calendar, special projects, awards received, class schedule, PTA/PTO information, school handbook, grade reports, school correspondence, immunization record, list of organizations/clubs, test results, career awareness activities and materials, and other relevant data. The goal of having parents keep such records about their elementary school children is to provide them with a vehicle for becoming involved in their children's career planning. "As they move through the educational system from elementary into middle/junior high school, to high school and into post high school training or work, parents have the responsibility to assure that their children develop a positive self image, now and understand their individual skills, and help them relate these to effective educational and career planning" (ibid.).

Suggestions for Involving the Community in K-12 Career Education

Because the issue of community involvement in career education spans K-12, the collaborative efforts among schools, business, and other agencies vary. However, the elements common to effective collaborative partnerships can help the stakeholders change the way they deliver services. These common elements are as follows (Imel 1995, pp. 17-19):

- **Involving the Right Players.** Partnerships achieve their maximum potential when the right mix of people from many organizations is involved. Involving employers of all sizes and types permits the partnership to provide a range of work experience options for students.
- **Ensuring Commitment.** The partnership must have the endorsement and support of high-level leaders from the collaborating organizations who are willing to assign time, money, and human resources to the partnership effort. Commitment can be fostered by developing a sense of ownership among the various organizations.
- **Developing a Shared Vision.** Developing a shared vision of intended outcomes that is realistic and sensitive to all partners' individual objectives is necessary to produce a genuine understanding among partners.
- **Producing a Formal Plan.** A formal plan that establishes joint long- and short-term goals and objectives as well as steps for achieving them is at the heart of a successful collaborative effort.
- **Emphasizing Performance.** Schools involved in partnerships need to adopt a private industry perspective that emphasizes performance and accountability.
- **Focusing on Common Ground.** A climate that ensures a focus on students' needs and expected outcomes should be fostered.
- **Maintaining the Partnership.** Partnerships need to be cultivated and maintained. Time and effort should be devoted to preparing for the inevitable changes that will result over the life of a partnership.

It has been estimated that 40-50 percent of what a child learns occurs in school and the remaining 50-60 percent comes from the family and community. "Without close articulation of and involvement with the family and larger community, schools will ultimately fail" (Family Involvement Partnership for Learning 1996, p. 14). Although there are many ways to involve business, community agencies, parents, and others in assisting students with the process of shaping their life careers, the efforts that are more organized and reflect the elements described here have a better chance of realizing effective collaboration among all stakeholders

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